

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH COLONEL JOHN
CHARLTON, COMMANDER, 1ST BRIGADE COMBAT TEAM, 3RD INFANTRY DIVISION
VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM RAMADI, IRAQ TIME: 10:15 A.M. EDT DATE: FRIDAY,
AUGUST 3, 2007

Copyright (c) 2007 by Federal News Service, Inc., Ste. 500 1000 Vermont Avenue,
NW, Washington, DC 20005, USA. Federal News Service is a private firm not
affiliated with the federal government. No portion of this transcript may be
copied, sold or retransmitted without the written authority of Federal News
Service, Inc. Copyright is not claimed as to any part of the original work
prepared by a United States government officer or employee as a part of that
person's official duties. For information on subscribing to the FNS Internet
Service, please visit <http://www.fednews.com> or call (202)347-1400

(Note: Please refer to www.defendamerica.mil for more information.)

CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): We've got
you on the line, and we will get started now. Colonel John Charlton, commander,
1st Brigade Combat Team at MNF-I, thank you for joining the bloggers roundtable
this morning, sir. If you've got an opening statement, the floor is yours now.

COL. CHARLTON: Sure. I'll just keep it brief so we have more time for
questions.

I'm Colonel John Charlton. I'm the commander of the 1st Brigade Combat
Team, 3rd Infantry Division, and I'm speaking to you from Ramadi, Iraq. Ramadi
is the provincial capital of Al Anbar province. I'm serving out here with
Multinational Forces-West, and I have a force of about 6,000 coalition soldiers,
Marines, airmen, sailors -- really a joint force. I have about 7,400 Iraqi
police and about 4,700 Iraqi army. So my total force is about 18,000, you know,
coalition forces and Iraqi security forces.

We arrived here in January and began operations. When we first got
here, this area was very, very violent. Anbar province had a reputation of
being probably the most violent area in Iraq, heavily dominated by al Qaeda, and
Ramadi was the stated capital of the Islamic State of Iraq. Al Qaeda had
declared it their capital, and they had a heavy presence inside the city. So we
kicked off about an eight-week campaign to clear the city. It was very intense
fighting, house-to-house, street-by-street. And we cleared the city after about
-- after that campaign and continued to fight al Qaeda in the outlying areas in
the month of April and May. And I can safely say that throughout my area of
operations, which is essentially the central portion of Al Anbar, al Qaeda has
been defeated. There are no operational cells within the city, and there are no
areas out surrounding the city that have any al Qaeda influence.

When we first got here, we averaged between 30 and 35 attacks a day;
that has now dropped to where we receive on average one attack or less a day.

We have had over 80 consecutive -- or excuse me -- 80 cumulative days
inside the city with zero attacks, not a shot fired, inside of Ramadi, which is
a city of 450,000, so that's why I feel very confident in saying al Qaeda is no
more in Ramadi.

It's been a tough fight, but right now we're at the point where we're moving forward on many different fronts. Economic development is going very well; reconstruction is going very well. And we're actually helping Ramadi put together its municipal government, and this is also proceeding very well. So we have a very dedicated Iraqi security force here, Iraqi army and Iraqi police. We have very good relationships with the tribal leaders throughout Al Anbar and in particular here in Ramadi, and we have great popular support. And so all of those things combined have helped us to sustain security and keep the violence levels down, which has -- which is the main reason we've been allowed to move forward in all those other areas I mentioned.

So all those trends here in Ramadi and in Al Anbar are a positive. They're still a threat; al Qaeda continues to strike back. They still try to get the car bombs, the truck bombs in because they know that they're -- they tend to grab the headlines with those types of attack, which is what they're looking for, of course. And we've been successful at keeping those attacks outside the city, so they've been unable to get any very devastating attacks inside the city. So that's good news there.

Recently, on the 30th of June, we thwarted an attack by al Qaeda. They had put together a fairly large force, about 50-60 fighters, and tried to infiltrate into the city from the south. This was a very well-organized, well-planned attack that we know through interrogations was directed by al Qaeda national leadership here in Iraq. These fighters, many of which were wearing suicide belts, were well-equipped, well-trained and well-organized. We received tips that this attack was about to occur, and on the evening, 30 June, we intercepted this force south of the city and defeated it. It was completely destroyed. We took some detainees and since then have been exploiting that through interrogation.

So that was a major blow to al Qaeda yet, and another major blow to al Qaeda here in Ramadi and in Al Anbar. Al Anbar has been a strategic failure for al Qaeda, and we can tell it bothers them because they continue to try and strike back. And they'll continue that in the near future. But the reason they've been unsuccessful and the reason they'll be unsuccessful in the future is the people of Al Anbar simply do not support their cause. They have rejected al Qaeda and every other terrorist group, and they are now looking forward to rebuilding and re-establishing peace and security throughout the province. So that's the main reason that things are going well here in Ramadi.

So that's about it. Kind of a quick opening, and I'll take any questions anyone has right now.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Thank you, Colonel Charlton, commander of 1st Brigade Combat Team, 3rd ID in Ramadi, Al Anbar province, Iraq.

David Axe, you were first on-line, so why don't you get us started.

Q Sure. Sir, thanks for taking the time to speak with us. I really appreciate. This is David Axe with Aviation Week. So I understand that there's been some progress in Al Anbar, but it seems like the progress is self-contained, and what I mean there is -- what I mean to ask is: Has there been advancements in getting Anbar integrated into the federal structure in terms of getting money and federal attention coming from Baghdad to make a lasting difference?

COL. CHARLTON: That's a good point.

The -- as most people know, the -- during the last national election in 2005, the Sunni population more or less set that one out, and you know, as a result, there's always been this kind of separation, I guess you'd say, between the Sunni population here in Anbar and the rest of the country. And what we're seeing now is increasing attempts to integrate into the federal structure.

The provincial government has come a long ways. Projects and money are now -- excuse me, I've got to have a little sip of water here. Sorry about that.

Anyway, the projects are starting to flow in now, and you're seeing more support from -- and more money -- from the central government coming down into the province. So that's moving in a positive direction.

Q Okay, thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: Bruce McLean (sp).

Q Sir, good to talk to you.

Wanted to get your assessment or sense of where you think the police you work with and the Iraqi army units you work with are in their development, and how well they are interacting with the population there?

COL. CHARLTON: Yeah, that's a real important aspect of the security out here. The -- you know the tribes out here in Al Anbar rejected al-Qaeda. I mean they were being attacked by al Qaeda, intimidated. Their very way of life was being threatened. And the police out here -- we didn't have a police force last year. I mean it was just too dangerous for someone to raise their hand and say, I'll be a policeman.

And the tribes -- the tribal leaders came together and convinced the -- and basically told the young men of Anbar to join the police force in order to protect the tribal area, protect their families. And they did so in droves. You know I've got about 7,400 police here just in Ramadi, and that happened in about one year based on the tribal sheiks asking the young men to join.

So what you have here is a very committed police force, very loyal, very committed to protecting the people of Al Anbar and Ramadi. So you don't have some of the problems that you see in other police forces -- excuse me -- and so that's going very well.

What they lack -- you know, they still have problems with equipment and logistics. And we're working with them everyday on that. And that's really the key to them becoming self sufficient is getting those systems in place so that they can sustain themselves. Q How about the Iraqi army units?

COL. CHARLTON: Oh, I'm sorry, yeah. The Iraqi army, it's an interesting situation out here, because the Iraqi army units, at least in my area, are largely Shi'ia. When they arrived on the scene out here, they were about 60 percent strength, again, mostly Shi'ia, and it was kind of an unusual situation.

Since that time we've actually done a lot of local recruiting, and these army forces are becoming more balanced now -- in fact, they're almost perfectly balanced between Sunni and Shi'ia. And they're performing very well.

Again, they have many of the same problems that the police do. A lot of their support systems are still very immature, and still in the process of being developed. So while they're very committed and very capable, they don't have the ability at this point to sustain themselves without coalition help.

Q Thanks.

MR. HOLT: Paul Silva (ph).

Q Jack, one of these days, could I get a question in? This is Jim Gerland (sp).

MR. HOLT: Oh sure, yeah, yeah, we can do that. Let's go with Paul Silva next.

Q Good afternoon, Colonel. Thanks for speaking with us today.

My question centers more on the economic development of the region seeing as that'll probably be a major key to the continued success of development.

Could you maybe tell us a little bit more about the economic efforts underway, and are they small scale or larger scale? And if so, what does the market look like for production in the area.

COL. CHARLTON: Sir, that's a great question. The -- you know, it's -- you've got to take kind of a holistic approach to economic development when you are dealing with a counterinsurgency.

After we had done our major offensive operations in February and March, you know the city was pretty much in a real bad state of affairs economically. I mean businesses were shut down. There were no large employers. I mean it was -- it was a mess.

And in that kind of situation you have tremendous instability. So you've got to do things to get the economy going rapidly. So what we did is, we started a day labor program that was implemented at the company commander level. And they went out and they hired young people throughout the city to help clear up their neighborhoods and remove rubble and stimulate that economy. It was kind of like a New Deal program here in Ramadi.

And since that time we've had 196 projects that have generated about 18,000 jobs, and again, they're short term jobs, but it's pumped about almost \$6 million into the economy to get things going.

Simultaneously to that, you go up the next step on the economic ladder, we've been focusing heavily on small business development. We have the Iraqi American Chamber of Commerce here in Ramadi. And they've started a small business grants program. And we helped them do assessments of all the small businesses in Ramadi to get that program going. And they've already done about 100 grants right now, and -- and more are on the way.

So we're -- you know, that's the next step up is to work with small businesses. We've got an agribusiness project that's about to start here in Ramadi with an organization that focuses in that area.

And so you just keep going up the ladder and working your way up towards the large employment centers. And we have one large factory here in Ramadi that is a former state-owned enterprise. It's a ceramics factory. And it's in good shape. It's just suffered from a few years of nonuse. And we hope to have that opened up, working very hard with the Iraqi government to get that opened back up in the next couple of months on a limited scale.

Once that thing gets into full operation, it'll employ about 1,000 to 1,500 citizens. So you know, you kind of -- you've got to keep working at every level. We have vo-tech training going on. We're doing contractors' workshop to help the contractors in the local area understand the contracting process when working with the government of Iraq and the coalition forces. So that -- that helped us move projects along faster.

And it's just -- you know, we're just going to continue to do that. And what I look for is, every time an organization comes to town that focuses on economic development, we try to figure out ways we can facilitate their operation.

Like I said, when the Iraqi-American Chamber of Commerce came to town, they wanted to do small business grants. They didn't know a whole lot about Ramadi. So, you know, I turned to the folks who do know a lot about Ramadi, and that's my company commanders. I got 50 company commanders, and 6,000 troops throughout the city. And they know everything out there about Ramadi. And we -- we actually help the Chamber of Commerce do these assessments and come up with good candidates for these grants.

So what that did is cut about two or three months off of their startup time, and allowed them to immediately start issuing grants. So, you know, I work -- we use our access to the population and knowledge of the city to facilitate these organizations and getting economic development going in the city.

And that really works to our advantage, because it helps stabilize communities by providing employment. So it works hand in glove with what we're trying to do on the security side.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, sir. Charlie Quidnunc.

Q Yes, Colonel, one of the ideas that I hear in Washington, one of the claims I hear in Washington is that we're arming the insurgents. Is that true? Or are we getting them integrated into the Iraqi army?

COL. CHARLTON: Arming the insurgents? You know I -- I'm not -- my focus when it comes to insurgents is capturing or killing them. So I don't see any arming of insurgents.

I think what gets referred to a lot of times is that, is we built police forces out here. We rely obviously on the local population to provide the young men for those forces. And it is this big misunderstanding that, you know, the tribes out here are being armed and they're going to battle al Qaeda, which is absolutely ridiculous.

What we're doing is, we're recruiting from the tribes, based on the support of the tribal leaders, to get the young men of Al Anbar to join the security forces, both Iraqi police and Iraqi army. They go through training. They are -- they receive a very thorough background check. And they even get

biometric scans of retina scans and fingerprints, and they're entered into the Iraqi police force, receive their training, and get paid by the Ministry of Interior.

So this idea of arming insurgents is certainly not happening out here in Al Anbar. Now you can make the argument that some of these guys may have been former insurgents, or had supported insurgencies in the past. You know, again, we do the background checks to make sure that they don't have any previous reporting through intelligence channels. But this idea that we're going around arming insurgents is ridiculous.

First of all all the insurgents I've ever seen or run into were already armed, so that wasn't really an issue with those guys.

MR. HOLT: Andrew Lubin.

Q Colonel, Andrew Lubin from OnPoint. Go to talk to you again, sir.

COL. CHARLTON: Yeah, great.

Q Good. Colonel, I think -- to follow up on Charlie's question, I think more what he's referring to is us arming -- is the Americans arming the Sunnis which are kind of opponents to the Maliki Shi'ia government, and we are arming a potentially -- a potential militia, a potential Sunni -- we're kind of developing a potential Sunni army against Maliki and the Shi'a government. Charlie, isn't that kind of what you're getting at?

COL. CHARLTON: First of all, you know, there's nobody running around here saying that they want to overthrow the central government. I mean, you can't help the fact that Al Anbar is predominately Sunni. That's just the demographics of this area. So when you want to create a police force, you really don't have much choice but to use what you've got here and that's all Sunni.

Q Agreed -- the system's working real well, but the opposition seems to be from the Maliki government, not from our end.

COL. CHARLTON: Well, and again, I don't immerse myself in the Baghdad political scene. What I do know is that when we put these young men through training, they understand that they are there to support Iraq and all of Iraq, not just Al Anbar. Clearly, their immediate interest is in protecting their families and the people of Al Anbar, but they swear allegiance to Iraq.

And when I go to these graduations, you know, they are -- you know, they chant support to Iraq and one Iraq. So I don't see that. I really don't. Is that a perception that may be found some places in Baghdad? That's certainly possible, but it's certainly -- from my vantage point out here from working with these Iraqi policemen everyday -- I certainly don't see it.

Now, on the Iraqi army side, the two brigades that I have here in my area just so happen to have -- the majority of them are Shi'a and they work side by side with the Iraqi police everyday.

So you know, I don't know what the perception is in Baghdad. But I can tell you, again, from working with these Iraqi police and Iraqi army forces everyday that they're committed to protecting Anbar from al Qaeda and they are very much interested in serving their nation. And they truly see it that way. They're not running around with Anbar flag displayed. They're running around with an Iraqi flag. So I'm very confident in their support to the government and the support to Iraq. Q Okay, thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay, thank you, sir.

And Grim.

Q I wish to yield space to the gentleman who hasn't been able to get a question in.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Jim.

Q Thanks.

Colonel, this is Jim Gerland (sp). I was with General Pace a couple of weeks ago when you gave him a tour of downtown Ramadi.

Sir, my question goes to the statement you made here to the Pentagon press corps where you said 20 percent of your troopers had made three deployments to Iraq and 60 percent were on their second. I'm just wondering what effect these repeated deployments have on their morale and how are they doing? I guess some of your Marine forces have been there for four deployments. So could you just give a rundown on that, please?

COL. CHARLTON: Yeah, well, the Marines deploy on a different timeline. Their deployments last about seven months and Army deployments last about 12 months. Currently now they've actually been extended to 15 months. It tends to average out over the course of a year or two. But yeah, there's a lot of soldiers and Marines here that have deployed multiple times and I'm one of them. This is my third trip over here.

So how does that effect morale? Well, it's always tough to leave your family. That never gets easy. And I've been in the army 23 years and I've left my family many times and I've got to tell you, it's tough.

Now, how's their morale? I think the key thing here now -- and I see this -- this is my third time over here in Iraq and I've seen this more now than I've ever seen it -- is a real sense of purpose from the young soldiers and Marines. And I don't mean that previously we didn't have a sense of purpose, but you know, now we're actually living with the Iraqis.

When you go out there you'll see, you know, soldiers and Marines living out in the city -- not just here in Al Anbar, of course, but across Iraq. And they really develop a connection to the community and I can sense that. I can feel it. They know the people of the neighborhood and they actually develop very, very strong bonds. And I'll tell you, that has a dramatic impact on morale, because again, it gives you that sense of purpose. These are not just people without, you know, faceless people out there that you're interacting with. They're people that you know, that you care about and that you've developed a relationship with. And I think that's a very positive effect on the morale across the force.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, sir.

We've got a few more minutes left here. Any follow up questions?

Q This is Grim of blackfive.net.

I would like to ask about the -- we were just talking to a fellow from State a few minutes ago. He was talking about the PRTs. You have an EPRT out where you are. Could you comment on their work a bit?

COL. CHARLTON: Yeah, I sure will. And I appreciate that question, because that is -- that's kind of one of the new secret weapons -- the embedded provincial reconstruction team.

You know, counterinsurgencies are fought and won at the neighborhood level, at the local level. So anything that you can do to improve local government is going to have a very positive effect in your overall effort to combat insurgencies and terrorism. And that's what the EPRT provides me as a brigade combat team commander. I now have a group of experts with Department of

State, USAID and experts in many different areas of government that now are embedded with my local government here in Ramadi -- the city government.

And it's very similar to how we train the Iraqi police and the Iraqi army. You know, we send teams of soldiers and Marines down to live with the police and the army units and work with them every day and that's had a very positive effect on those forces. Now, we're doing the same thing on the government side.

So if you go downtown Ramadi and go to where the local government works, you'll see these EPRT members sitting down with them and everyday working with them. Developing a relationship with the city government and helping them with the challenges that they face.

A good example of how well that's working is three months ago we had no power coming into the city -- no electricity -- none whatsoever from all the fighting. Everybody was living off a generator and that was the only way you could power anything in the homes around Ramadi. Now, 80 percent of the city has power. It's just absolutely remarkable how well this young city government, that didn't exist a few months ago, has moved forward in providing services to the population.

I give a lot of credit to that -- this EPRT concept. It is focused at the local level and I think it's going to make a big difference.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, sir. And we're about out of time here. Colonel, do you have any closing comments for us?

COL. CHARLTON: No. I just appreciate all the -- these are great questions and I appreciate everybody's support.

You know, I've just got to remind every one of you that -- I'm privileged every day to serve with these great Americans. They work under some tough conditions. They're a long ways from home. They've been away from home for a while, but they are absolutely the most precious thing that America has to offer. And it's just been a great honor for me to have the opportunity to serve with them. I just ask you to continue to pray for all these men and women and for their families back home and appreciate your support.

Thanks.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, sir.

Colonel John Charlton, commander 1st Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division with us this morning for the "Bloggers Roundtable."

Thank you very much, sir, and we look forward to speaking with you again.

COL. CHARLTON: Okay, thanks. Bye.

END.